

Learning about the environment



Photos by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Jeff Anderson, North Cascades Institute science and stewardship coordinator, shows children a shed snakeskin that was discovered in the hollow of a large rock in Lower Sandy Campground.

Children work in, learn about nature in program

By **KIMBERLY CAUVEL**
@Kimberly_SVH

Although closed to the public for the day, Lower Sandy Campground was bustling with activity as 44 kids came together to help improve the site.

On the edge of Baker Lake, which glistened blue-green in the sun, kids 10 and older worked in groups to pick up litter, install fire rings, plant trees and do some hiking.

Some wore hard hats, some mastered shovels, some held trash bags.

All of them learned about the environment.

Nathaly Lopez, 7, was fascinated with a tree stump she saw along the trail on the hike.

"I learned that when you

cut a tree off and it shows how many lines it has, that's how many years (old) it is," she said.

Adults provided aid, direction and oversight throughout the day.

Those participating came together through a partnership between the North Cascades Institute's Youth Leadership Adventures program and the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program in Mount Vernon.

John Gerondale, Kulshan Creek Neighborhood resource officer with the Mount Vernon Police Department, said the program has actually expanded to include Mount Vernon children from outside the Kulshan Creek neighborhood.



Jeff Anderson, science and stewardship coordinator at North Cascades Institute, and **Andrea Pantoja, 11,** of Mount Vernon plant a small grand fir tree at Lower Sandy Campground on the edge of Baker Lake.

See **PROGRAM**, Page A5

Program

Continued from Page A1

"It's amazing how the program has grown," he said.

This is the third year North Cascades Institute's Youth Leadership Adventures program and the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program came to work and celebrate nature at Lower Sandy Campground.

"This is kind of a special day because North Cascades leadership kids take on a leadership role for the Kulshan kids, a Hispanic group from Mount Vernon," said Ann Dunphy, recreation crew leader with the U.S. Forest Service.

And as they get older, some kids transition from one program to the other.

Samara Mejia, 16, is serving as an intern with the Kulshan Creek program and plans to go on a 15-day trip in August with the North Cascades Institute. She first participated in community activities through Catholic Housing Services when she was 8 and last year went on a 12-day trip with Youth Leadership Adventures.

"I liked it that we would learn stuff, but still have a lot of fun," she said.

Her excitement showed when she talked about her upcoming trip.

"Last summer I was really shy, but by the end (of the trip) I was sad to leave." She said. "I'm excited to meet new people."

Nancy Andrade and Lorena Ochoa, both 12, missed the bus that was to pick them up at their apartment complex in Mount Vernon and take them to Baker Lake. They ran more than a mile to catch it.

"I really wanted to enjoy this opportunity," Andrade

said.

"I always like helping and coming to see nature and all the animals," Ochoa said.

"We don't want the Earth to be dirty and messy. We want it to be clean since we live in it," Andrade added.

Both girls participated in similar programs before and hope to come back for more.

"They're used to just being at home with buildings and sidewalks. To bring them out here is a treat," said U.S. Forest Ranger Orlando Garcia, who grew up in the Kulshan Creek neighborhood. "One time a student told me 'It's so beautiful, I don't want to leave.'"

Aneka Singlaub, youth leadership coordinator with the North Cascades Institute, helped Andrea Pantoja, 11, gauge how big a hole to dig for a grand fir tree no more than two feet tall.

Singlaub said planting new vegetation along the shore of the lake is an important component in improving the campground because with use at the site soil wears down and crumbles into the water. More dirt in the water makes it murky and can harm insects and fish, she said.

Designated fire pits are important additions so campers don't gather rocks from around the site, which further impacts the environment, she said.

Institute staff seek to conserve and restore Northwest environments, and education is their best tool, Singlaub said.

"If people don't have the chance to experience a place, they won't care for it," Youth Leadership manager Amy Brown said.

■ Reporter Kimberly Cauvel: 360-416-2199, kcauvel@skagitpublishing.com, Twitter: @Kimberly_SVH, facebook.com/bykimberlycauvel

Skagit Valley Herald / goskagit.com

Wednesday, July 31, 2013